A PLACE FOR EVERYONE

Congregations Building Community

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"The old woman stood with eyes uplifted in her Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes: high shoes polished about the tops and toes, a long rusty dress adorned with an old corsage, long withered, and the remnants of an elegant silk scarf. . . .There was a dazed and sleepy look in her aged blue-brown eyes. But for those who searched hastily for 'reasons' in that old tight face, shut now like an ancient door, there was nothing to be read. And so they gazed nakedly upon their own fear transferred; a

fear of the black and the old, a terror of the unknown as well as the deeply known. Some of those who saw her there on the church steps spoke words about her that were hardly fit to be heard, others held their pious peace; and some felt vague stirrings of pity, small and persistent and hazy, as if she were an old collie turned out to die."

That's the way African American author Alice Walker introduces a short story, "The Welcome Table," from a line in an old spiritual:

> **"I'm going to sit at the Welcome table**
> **shout my troubles over**
> **Walk and talk with Jesus."**

The old black woman has staggered down a country road half a mile from her house, on the Lord's day, drawn by the shinning cross that stands high on the church's steeple, to the "welcome table." But it's the wrong church.

Some of them there at the church saw her age, her color, the dotage, the missing buttons down the front of her mildewed black dress. Others saw cooks, chauffers, maids, mistresses. Many saw jungle orgies . . . while others were reminded of riotous anarchists looting and raping in the streets. Those who knew the hesitant creeping of the law, saw the beginning of the end of the

sanctuary of Christian worship, saw the desecration of Holy Church.

As she stepped into the vestibule, the minister stopped her: 'Auntie, you know this is not your church.'

The old woman brushed past him and took a seat on a back pew. People stared and shifted uneasily. An usher asked her to leave; she 'waved his frozen blond hair out of her face.'

Finally, it was the ladies who did what to them had to be done, and asked their husband to throw the old colored woman out.

Inside the church it was warmer. They sang, they prayed.

The protection and promise of God's impartial love grew more not less desirable as the sermon gathered fury and lashed itself out above their penitent heads.

One of the great anomalies of human history is that religion—which stands for justice, compassion, love, tolerance and almost always a doctrine of creation, an anthropology based on the oneness of the human race—one of the truly great anomalies is how implicated and deeply involved religion is in exclusivism, intolerance, injustice and ethnic violence. There is, it seems, something about religious zeal for truth which is the fertile seed bed of exclusivism which becomes

intolerance which becomes violence with striking frequency in the human story.

You don’t have to go any further than American church history to see it, as Alice Walker has so eloquently expressed it.

Kenneth Ross, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch speaks about the “new tribalism”—and says, “of all the features of the post-Cold War world, the most consistently troubling are turning out to be the tribal hatreds that divide humankind by race, faith and nationality.” (Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* p.15)

Croation theologian Miroslav Volf has written an important book, *Exclusion and Embrace,* out of his own personal experiences in the Croatian-

Serbian-Bosnian war. Croatia is heavily Roman Catholic, Serbia is predominantly Eastern Orthodox, Bosnia is mostly Muslim. It was that conflict which gave us perhaps the ugliest phrase in the English language—"ethnic cleansing;" the removal of Muslims from what was called "greater Serbia," by whatever means necessary, including massacres. Volf quotes a soldier in the Serbian army which at the time was reigning artillery shells on the beautiful and defenseless city of Sarajevo, into public buildings, hospitals, market places, picking off the elderly, children, in what became known as "snipers alley." "There is no choice," the Serbian soldier said. "There are no innocents." Volf traces the insidious process

by which the unthinkable becomes thinkable, and then actually happens, the way historians, economists, political scientists, cultural anthropologists, are easily enlisted to demonize and dehumanize the "other", the "different,"— blacks in South Africa or the American south, Christians in the Sudan, Catholics in Northern Ireland, Muslims in Bosnia, Jews in Germany, Palestinians in the Middle East. "Finally," he observes, "the priests enter in solemn procession and accompanying all this with a soothing background chant that offers to any whose consciences may have been bothered that God is on our side and that the enemy is the enemy of God and therefore an adversary of everything

that is true, good, and beautiful.” (p.87-88) The familiar result—apartheid, holocaust, ethnic cleansing.

In 1996-97, I was Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Visiting mission workers in Ocijek, Croatia—a study in the breakdown of community.

Catholics/Orthodox/Muslim/Evangelicals lived together—then came apart.

In Croatia, the Serbs conquered, then were pushed back, releasing deep ethnic hatred, supported by religion.

In Vukovar—bombed public buildings.
In Vinkovsci—2 Cathedrals

But we also saw religious faith as a catalyst in building community.

Agape—Antol Bolag

Muslim village—rebuilding. No Mosque. Why? Because you want to convert us: Why would you build our mosque? Because we follow one who told us to love our neighbor.

Story of marginalized outcast who stopped to help wounded enemy.

Hans Kung:

“There will be no peace among the peoples of this world without peace among the world religions. There will be no peace among the world religions without peace among the Christian churches. The community of the church is an integral part of the world community. Peace is indivisible: it begins with us.” (*Christianity and the World Religions)*

Dirk Ficca, Presbyterian minister who heads the Parliament of the World’s Religions, underscores

the fact that learning to live with diversity is the most critical challenge facing our country and our religious institutions.

The statistics on religious diversity in Chicago alone are stunning. There are, in the Chicago Metropolitan area, two million Protestants, 3 million Catholics, 261,000 Jews, 500,000 Muslims; 220,000 Buddhists; 80,000 Hindus; 20,000 Native Americans from 200 different tribes; 5,000 Sikhs, 5,000 Jains, 5,000 Unitarians.

There are, Ficca and others note, four basic ways to deal with diversity: the first is to eliminate diversity, to cleanse the community or nation of

the others. That's the choice of Facism; it is the dogma of The Church of the Creator, whose leader, Benjamin Smith, shot five Jewish adults and a child walking to Synagogue in Skokie, African-American basketball coach, Ricky Birdsong and a Korean university student.

It was and is the doctrine and methodology of Nazism in regard to Judaism; zealous Serbians in regard to Muslims and our government, in the 19th century, in regard to Native Americans.

The second way to deal with diversity is the "Melting Pot." Time was, not long ago, that we thought it was a good idea. Melt everyone—

blend everyone—into a new identity. And that sounded good until we discovered that it doesn't work: that minority groups that consent to be melted in the pot, end up looking like the predominant culture.

The third way is to compartmentalize. Separate but equal. No mixing. Apartheid. Jim Crow. Segregation. Reservations. Internment camps. It doesn't work either. Besides violating the very basic idea of a free and equal society, separate, we have painfully learned, is never equal.

And so we are driven by pragmatic, painful, tragic experience to the fourth method which is to

accept diversity as a basic characteristic of the human condition and then learn to understand it, appreciate it, love it and celebrate it. (See D. Ficca, *Uncommon Ground: Living Faithfully in a Diverse World)*

I'm grateful, by the way, that the melting pot didn't work every time I take a Saturday bike ride up the lake front, beginning at Oak Street Beach, through multi-racial North Avenue Beach, through African American family picnics and the irresistible aroma of barbequed ribs, then an Hispanic baseball game played by adults with families and children and food and loud music, and then a Korean soccer league and finally at

the top—the water fountain and bench to rest and chat with a Russian Jewish couple walking their dog and getting a little sun.

We are driven to celebrate diversity by the reality that nothing else works; every other approach ends in injustice, intolerance and tragedy. But of all people, Christians—you and I—who mean to follow and trust and be disciples of Jesus, the Palestinian Jew—of all people you and I should not need to be driven by sociological, political and cultural realities. We ought to begin there, because we were there, as early in our history as possible.

For us—how to deal with diversity—begins in the year 50 AD when a Christian preacher by the name of Paul arrived in one of the most cosmopolitan and diverse cities in the ancient world—the Greek city of Corinth. The little Christian community Paul established had a problem from the start—diversity. Most religions are homogeneous—racially. But not the Christian church in Corinth. In fact, the little church was badly fractured theologically. People were arguing about everything. There were liberals and conservatives and moderates and fundamentalists. There were Jewish believers, and Gentile believers and no one knew what to do with them, and there were people from the east

and people of color from the south. And on top if it all, a kind of spiritual enthusiasm broke out in this little church called glossalalia; some were becoming overcome by the Spirit and speaking in tongues and then, as often happens, feeling smug and superior about their experience of faith and condescending toward everybody else.

So Paul writes, patiently, carefully, pragmatically. "There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit . . . varieties of service but one Lord, varieties of activities but one God . . . to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good . . .in the one Spirit we are all

baptized into one body—Jews or Greek, slaves or free."

The heart of Paul's argument—and this is both new theologically, and also basic to the Christian faith—is that diversity is God's idea. It is not an accident of geography or biology. It is not a nuisance to be overcome or a problem to be solved..

Diversity is God's gift to the church. Diversity is part and parcel of God's good creation. Diversity is good. It is rooted in the very character of God. And so to deny it, to treat people differently, to do violence to people, to oppress, on the basis of their race—is not simply an affront, it is a denial of the reality of God. It is that basic. There is, in God's kingdom—and therefore there must be in God's church—a place for everybody. Furthermore, diversity is for the common good. Mixing it up is God's delightful intent for creation.

We have come a long way in forty years. And we have a long way to go. Every major religious

body has passed and issued statements condemning racism and advocating for a community and a church in the community that is color blind, open, diverse. It has not been as easy as we hoped it might be. 11:00, we are endlessly reminded, is still the most segregated hour of the week. When the Utopian vision of the 60's failed to materialize, "an integrated church in an integrated society," we weren't sure why or what to do next. And in the meantime, the curse of racism continues to bedevil us. 15 young men are killed by police in Cincinnati in recent years—all of them African Americans. Even *Time Magazine* acknowledges the depth of racism in our country by describing how African American

children continue to regard the police, not as protectors, but as a threat to their lives.

Racial profiling—Affirmative Action—which gave us a hint of what minority leadership might contribute—Colin Powell, Condoleeze Rice, Roderick Page, Secretary of Education, is under attack—even in Powell's and Rice's and Page's own political party.

We have a long way to go and I continue to be convinced that we religious congregations have a major role to play.

First, as truth tellers, the familiar and often scary role of prophet: to tell truth, to describe reality: not self-righteously, not pontifically, but inclusively. W are part of it; it has not been easy, is not easy, but we are racist institutions that function comfortably in a racist culture.

Second, as truth doers. 300 Cincinnati clergy put their bodies on the line and stood between the police and an angry mob and—for a while, at least, it worked. Chicago clergy call a cease-fire and put their leaders in harms' way. When busing came to Columbus, Ohio and violence threatened, religious congregations stepped in and people showed up at the beginning and

ending of the school day to be there—to stand between children and angry protestors.

Third, truth demonstrators. In our congregations, we can be newly aware that we are one of the last bastions of authentic community in a society turned inward, a society where people "Bowl Alone." We can simply keep on keeping on, practicing the simple hospitality of Jesus.

This effort is incredibly important. <u>Congregations Building Community</u> is evidence of the great promise of our faith, that blessed day when our streets will be full of the old ones, sitting and

talking and our children laughing and playing in safety and freedom.

We have a long way to go.

Diversity is God's good idea. The one who is different is God's gift to you.

It was Jesus who stunned his friends and followers by reaching out to the racially and ethnically marginalized in his day—the Samaritan woman, for instance.
It was Jesus who welcomed at his table those who were different—the poor, the religiously

unorthodox, the sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors.

It is our Lord Jesus Christ who comes close to each one of us when we feel marginalized, shunned, shut out and assures us that we are all one in Christ.

And it is the same Christ who challenges each of us to let go of and to move beyond our discomfort and fear of those who are different and to open our hearts and lives and arms to the beautiful, multi-colored, multi-faceted, multi-raced and multi-cultural diversity of God's good creation.

“The old woman stood at the top of the steps looking about in bewilderment. She had been singing in her head. They had interrupted her. Promptly she began to sing again. Suddenly she looked down the long gray highway and saw something interesting and delightful coming. She started to grin, toothlessly, with short giggles of joy, jumping about and slapping her hands on her knees. For coming down the highway at a firm but leisurely pace was Jesus . . . .She would have known him, recognized him anywhere . . . .Ecstatically she began to wave her arms for fear he would miss seeing her . . .

All he said when he got up close was, ‘Follow me’ and she bounded down to his side. They walked in deep silence for a long time. Finally, she started telling him about how many years she had cooked for them, cleaned for them, nursed them. . . .
She told him how they had grabbed her when she was singing in her head and tossed her out of his church. An old heifer like me, she said.

She broke the silence one more time to tell Jesus how glad she was that he had come, how she had often looked at his picture

hanging on her wall over her bed, and how she had never expected to see him in person. She did not know where they were going, somewhere wonderful, she suspected. The ground was like clouds under her feet and she felt she could walk forever without becoming the least bit tired. She even began to sing out loud some of the old spirituals she loved . . . . They walked on, looking straight over the tree tops into the sky . . . .

The people in church never knew what happened to the old woman; they never mentioned her to one another or to anybody else. Most of them heard sometime later

that an old colored woman fell dead along the highway. Silly as it seemed, it appeared she had walked herself to death.

Many of the black families along the road said they had seen the old lady . . . sometimes singing . . . sometimes silent and smiling, looking at the sky.
She had been alone, they said. Some of them wondered where the old woman had been going so stoutly that it had worn her heart out. They guessed maybe she had relatives across the river some miles away, but none of them really knew." (Alice Walker, *The Welcome Table,* in *Listening for God,*

Contemporary Literature, and the Life of Faith, **Vol. 1, p.107-114)**

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”

Amen.